



Community Fire Project Pays Off

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Hawaii County, Hawaii

Waikoloa Village, HI - One of the largest fires ever recorded on the Big Island of Hawaii torched 25,000 acres of grassland in August of 2005. The wildfire threatened Waikoloa Village, a community of about 5,000 people located on the slopes of Mauna Kea above the Kohala Coast. Fortunately for the residents and property owners, a 30-foot firebreak cleared weeks before by volunteers and members of the Waikoloa Firewise Committee prevented the fire from engulfing the village.



Since its inception in 2003, the Waikoloa Firewise Committee has had several meetings, workshops, and workdays to develop its wildfire risk reduction plans. The committee wants to take active steps toward the prevention and mitigation of wildfires because they are aware of the high risk in the community. Waikoloa Village is located in a rather remote location, surrounded by brush and grass, with a single road used for both entry and exit. The site was used by the United States Army during World War II, which left unexploded munitions buried on the property.

On July 9, 2005, a team of 22 Firewise Committee volunteers united to create the firebreak that saved Waikoloa Village. Local businesses donated equipment, refreshments were provided throughout the workday, and truckloads of burnable material were hauled away.

During the August 2005 wildfire, village residents evacuated as a precaution. No one panicked and the evacuation proceeded smoothly. Upon returning to their homes, the residents found no structural damage. There was soot and smoke in the homes – clear evidence of their proximity to disaster.

“The firebreak did its job,” stated Captain Michael Milare. “It provided time for the firefighters to respond, approach the fire, and let us do our job. Without it, the fire would have entered the subdivision and caused serious damage.”

The firebreak created by the Waikoloa community was the only fuel break that held up during the wildfire, and is credited with saving the area homes. Action taken by the Firewise Committee proved economically beneficial to the village. The project completed by volunteers and in-kind donations protected this community of 2000 homes, with a current average market value of \$450,000.

Firewise Communities/USA, a project of the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program, encourages local Firewise Committees to work together to maintain fire readiness and protect their communities from wildfire. Firewise was established in the state of Hawaii in 2002 by Ms. Denise Laitinen, who was the first state coordinator for the United States. She operated through a grant the State Division of Forestry and Wildlife received from the Forest Service. Ms. Laitinen traveled throughout the Hawaiian Islands, conducting Firewise workshops and educating residents about safe practices to mitigate against wildfire.

Mitigating against wildfire was one goal of the Hawaii County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan, and establishing Firewise Community Development Workshops for Firewise Communities was a specific mitigation action under this plan.

The workshops bring members of the community together to learn what fire-safe practices they can implement in their community. Participants learn details about the Firewise programs, grants, and resources.

“Firewise works,” stated Pete Hoffman, member of the Hawaii County Council and chairman of the Waikoloa Firewise Committee. Mr. Hoffman said that because of the success of the firebreak, nobody was hurt and no homes were lost in the recent wildfire.

A neighboring community, Kohala by the Sea, has received formal recognition from the national Firewise Communities/ USA program for its proactive fire safety measures. Fire hoses, the same size as professional fire fighting equipment, have been installed throughout the community. Homeowners are encouraged to use fire-resistant landscaping materials, and an additional escape route from the community has been created. Additionally, residents undertook an effective vegetation management project, erecting almost two miles of fencing to enclose cattle which feed on fuel grasses. Kohala by the Sea is the recipient of the 50th community award in the nation.

The Waikoloa Village Firewise Committee has continued its work with the assistance of a grant from Firewise Communities/USA, and has scheduled a full agenda of workdays. Among the mitigation projects are a demonstration site which will display fire-resistant landscaping and building materials, the creation of a "buffer" zone at the boundary of the village, and the creation of a secondary road for egress from the village.

Firewise Communities and Firewise Committees are very active throughout the United States. Information regarding these programs is available on the <http://www.firewise.org> Firewise website.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region IX**

State: **Hawaii**

County: **Hawaii County**

City/Community: **Waikoloa Village**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public/Private Partnership**

Hazard Type: **Wildfire**

Activity/Project Type: **Vegetation Management**

Structure Type: **Wood Frame**

Activity/Project Start Date: **07/2005**

Activity/Project End Date: **08/2005**

Funding Source: **Property Owner, Residential**

Funding Recipient: **Property Owner - Residential**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$3,000.00 (Estimated)**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **No**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2005**

Repetitive Loss Property? **No**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.firewise.org>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/hazard/fire/index.shtm>

Main Points

- One of the largest fires ever recorded on the Big Island of Hawaii torched 25,000 acres of grassland in August of 2005.
- Fortunately for residents of Waikoloa Village, a 30-foot firebreak cleared weeks before by volunteers and members of the Waikoloa Firewise Committee prevented the fire from engulfing the village.
- Firewise Communities/USA, a project of the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program, encourages local Firewise Committees to work together to maintain fire readiness and protect their communities from wildfire.
- Other Waikoloa Village Firewise Committee projects include a demonstration site which will display fire-resistant landscaping and building materials, the creation of a “buffer” zone at the boundary of the village, and the creation of a secondary road for egress from the village.



Big Isle Firefighters spray water and residents cut back brush. Honolulu Star-Bulletin, August 2005.



Inspecting for fire hazards on private properties is proactive mitigation.



The Waikoloa Village fuel break is credited with saving homes during a record wildfire.